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SUBJECT: LEBANON: WHAT DOES HIZBALLAH HAVE IN STORE FOR
LEBANON NOW?

REF: A. BEIRUT 618 B. BEIRUT 704

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) This is part one of a three-part series of cables looking at where Lebanon is headed after violence erupted following the Siniora government's May 5 decisions to confront Hizballah (Ref A). This message (part one) deals with Hizballah's intentions now that it has withdrawn its militants from downtown Beirut and allowed Beirut International Airport (BIA) to reopen. Part two will explore how the GOL, having been dealt a severe blow by the ordeal, can regain the political advantage and its strategy for dealing with a newly emboldened Hizballah. Finally, part three will look at possible U.S. strategies, given the new reality on the ground.

¶2. (C) In the wake of the week-long standoff between Hizballah and the Lebanese government, neither party appears to be the clear-cut winner, though Hizballah emerged relatively stronger. However, forced to resort to violence against Lebanese citizens to achieve its political objectives, Hizballah did not emerge unscathed. Its next order of business will be to regain its claim to legitimacy as a "resistance," by appearing to play a constructive role at the National Dialogue just launched May 16 evening in Doha (leaving Michel Aoun to do its dirty work), while continuing to pursue its own agenda behind the scenes. End summary.

A LOSE-LOSE SITUATION,
BUT HIZBALLAH EMERGES
RELATIVELY STRONGER

¶3. (C) Both the GOL and Hizballah were losers in the week-long standoff, but the GOL lost more, leaving Hizballah to enter negotiations from a relatively stronger position. Having seen what Hizballah is capable of, the GOL is likely to tread carefully in any future decisions, and the LAF, successfully intimidated, unlikely to challenge Hizballah openly any time soon. However, in some respects Hizballah played its only card; by occupying downtown Beirut and parts of the Chouf and instigating violence that resulted in dozens of deaths, Hizballah overplayed its hand and public blame for any second round would likely to fall on Hizballah's shoulders. The National Dialogue is an opportunity for both

sides to step back and reflect before determining their next moves.

¶4. (C) Hizballah achieved its immediate objective: to force the government to rescind its May 5 decisions to transfer the head of airport security and to confront Hizballah's fiber optics network following the discovery of a Hizballah surveillance camera at Beirut International Airport. However, this victory came at the expense of exposing Hizballah's true colors (e.g., gaining political control of the country) while at the same time undermining the credibility of its claim of holding arms exclusively for the purpose of "resistance" against Israel.

TACTICAL GOALS:

PRESERVE ITS WEAPONS,
REPOLISH ITS TARNISHED IMAGE,
SOLIDIFY POLITICAL GAINS

¶5. (C) Realizing it may have gone too far, Hizballah's next goal probably will be to save face by appearing to play a constructive role at Doha, and, as usual, leaving the role of spoiler to March 8 ally Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun. Aoun, happy to play this role to keep his own prospects for the presidency alive, has many options in this regard, which he has used in the past to block efforts to reach an agreement: 1) insist on a prior agreement on ministerial portfolios (which March 14 majority leader Saad Hariri rejects); 2) insist on a blocking minority (ditto); 3) insist on an electoral law that benefits his party (1960 law). Using the Qataris as a front, Hizballah probably will push for a 10-10-10 cabinet distribution (ten seats each for the majority, opposition, and president) as the starting point for discussions, knowing full well that neither Saad nor Aoun will accept this.

¶6. (C) While playing the role of constructive interlocutor, Hizballah's real agenda will be to preserve its key interests: 1) keep discussion of its arms off the agenda at Doha; instead confining the discussions to cabinet formation and electoral law; 2) secure a blocking minority to ensure that the GOL is unable to take decisions like those of May 5 or any other actions that could jeopardize Hizballah's arms or security apparatus. This would also prevent the new cabinet from stepping back from the previous cabinet's ministerial statement in 2005 (which Hizballah, then still part of the government, accepted), which said the cabinet "considers the Lebanese resistance a natural and sincere expression of the national right of the Lebanese people in liberating their territory and defending their dignity in face of the Israeli aggressions, threats, and desires, and working on the continuation of liberating Lebanese territory."

¶7. (C) Hizballah almost certainly would court Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman to ensure that, once elected, Sleiman does not challenge Hizballah's arms. If at any point Hizballah feels that its arms are at risk, we would not be surprised to see some sort of provocation of Israel, whether attributable to Hizballah or not, to spark an Israeli reaction that would restore Hizballah's credentials as a "resistance" and expose the weakness of the LAF; 3) maintain the "tent city" sit-in outside the Prime Minister's office; 4) keep international focus on Doha to prevent a UNSC Resolution addressing Hizballah's arms. By leaning on friendlier UNSC members (Libya? Russia?), fostering the perception that the Doha talks are productive, and stressing that the issues are internal Lebanese matters, Hizballah (or its allies) probably will seek to dampen UNSC enthusiasm for a resolution at this time.

STRATEGIC GOALS:

GAZA-STYLE COUP D'ETAT

¶8. (C) Hizballah's longer-term strategic goal, we suspect, is driven more by Iran than Syria and ultimately is to secure political dominance of the country by peaceful means --

"Gaza-style," as Saad would characterize it (Ref A). This strategy entails derailing the National Dialogue if it appears to be forcing Hizballah to compromise, but otherwise stringing it along as a stalling technique to bide time until the international, regional, and domestic tides turn in Hizballah's favor. The U.S. presidential election is a key factor here, with Iran, Syria, and Hizballah all counting on U.S. disengagement in Lebanon for the next six to nine months starting from the run-up to the election until the new administration gets settled in mid-2009. The wager is that, regardless of who wins, there will be a friendlier face in the White House. Meanwhile, Iran can continue with its nuclear programs unhindered, solidifying its standing in the region.

¶9. (C) To achieve this goal, Hizballah needs to consolidate its domestic support and reestablish its legitimacy as a "resistance." If necessary, this again could involve some sort of Hizballah provocation of Israel, perhaps, as it did in 2006, taking advantage of the situation in Gaza to launch its own attack. Hizballah no doubt is angling for a repeat of its 2006 rebound, when support among Lebanese Shia in the south for Hizballah plummeted immediately after the war, only to bounce back once memories faded on who initiated the conflict.

¶10. (C) Hizballah also will continue its efforts to build what is essentially a state-within-a-state, building up its military arsenal, and expanding its fiber optics and social service networks. While its arms and telephone network will continue to be painted as essential for countering Israel aggression, the tangible on-the-ground services, highlighted by a sophisticated public relations campaign, provided to Lebanese Shia probably are key to expanding its public constituency.

¶11. (C) The flip side of this strategy is continued efforts to weaken those state institutions that threaten Hizballah's hegemony: the LAF and GOL. Hizballah will work to discredit the LAF, either by demonstrating its ineffectiveness at defending the country from Israel or, capitalizing on the violence of the last week, its inability to prevent sectarian clashes within the country. We would not rule out further Hizballah-induced sectarian skirmishes in an attempt to upset the LAF's fragile unity, albeit avoiding an eruption into a full-fledged Sunni-Shia conflict, which we doubt Iran wants to see at this time.

¶12. (C) Hizballah will continue its efforts to undermine the Siniora government through "erosion" by providing social welfare services where the GOL has failed (or taking credit for GOL-provided services) and by disrupting the economy, e.g., through labor demonstrations. The week-long closure of Beirut International Airport, in addition to the political impact, also has economic consequences. So far the country has exhibited its usual, if not remarkable, resilience in times of crisis, thanks in large part to the efforts of Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, whom we suspect is another ripe target for Hizballah courtship.

¶13. (C) Hizballah also will work to weed out its enemies within the Shia community. Its recent ousting of the Mufti of Tyre is the most visible example of what appears to be a full-blown effort to clean house (septel) and install Shia religious leaders of its own choosing in the country's most powerful positions. Finally, we suspect Hizballah will seek ways to sow divisions among the Christians, leaving Aoun as the strongest Christian leader.

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